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ABSTRACT

Intended to assist educational leaders by identifying recommendations from the report, "A Nation at Risk," that are relevant to reading and literacy and by suggesting instructional guidelines consistent with both the report and current reading research, this booklet presents policy guidelines in the following areas: (1) literacy processes, (2) curriculum content, (3) teacher effectiveness, (4) textbook quality, and (5) parent involvement. The first section discusses instructional objectives for reading, writing, and study skills while the second briefly touches on methods of implementing English instruction, reading across the curriculum, and the United States' literary heritage. The third section examines the impact of time use, organization, and teacher preparation on teacher effectiveness, and the fourth considers the selection and use of textbooks. The final section discusses the importance of parental involvement in children's education. (MM)

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Responding to "A Nation at Risk"

Appraisal and Policy Guidelines

Research Department
International Reading Association

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Responding to "A Nation at Risk"

Appraisal and Policy Guidelines

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Overview

This response to "A Nation at Risk" appraises the recommendations of the National Commission on Excellence in Education that pertain to language and literacy. From a research base, it presents policy guidelines that will inform educational leaders. A total of 42 experts relying on 392 sources contributed to the following topics: (1) Introduction, (2) Literacy Processes, (3) Curriculum Content, (4) Teacher Effectiveness, (5) Textbook Quality, and (6) Parent Involvement.

Introduction

The Report

The National Commission on Excellence in Education, in its report "A Nation at Risk," produced a political document of considerable moment for this country. The Commission's mandate was not to conduct research, nor to serve an opinion, nor even to lay out a strategy for change. The goal was to assemble the collective concerns about the present state of the schools, to identify sources for this concern, and to present some suggestions for reform. The Commission carried out this task with dispatch and presented its work in three dozen provocative pages. Seldom has a federal body been so successful in meeting its mandate.

Purpose of This Appraisal

The report from the National Commission on Excellence in Education has placed education on the public agenda at the national, state, and local levels. The burden for school improvement, however, is borne by educators who are the professionals in this field. This appraisal is intended to assist educational leaders by: (1) identifying recommendations from the report that are relevant to reading and literacy, (2) suggesting policy guidelines for instruction that are related to these recommendations and are consistent with the knowledge base from research on reading. These guidelines are presented within the framework of a societal emphasis on lifelong learning.

Learning Society

Recommendations from "A Nation at Risk" are often statements of societal goals. For example, one suggestion is that students should learn their literary heritage. Such goals are value affirmations. To evaluate them relies on ideological or philosophical positions. These assertions are not easily addressed by educational research which describes what is true rather than what ought to be true in education.

Many recommendations are stated as educational means to societal ends. For instance one recommendation is that the length of the school day should be increased to permit more time for learning. This may be evaluated in studies which examine the means-end relationship between time and achievement. When "should" statements are directed toward education as a means, traditional research which describes what "is" will be useful.

The primary goal that should be accomplished with educational programs, according to "A Nation at Risk," is stated explicitly:

> Educational reform should focus on the goal of creating a Learning Society. At the heart of such a society is the commitment to a set of values and to a system of education that affords all members the opportunity to stretch their minds to full capacity, from early childhood through adulthood, learning more as the world itself changes. (p. 13)

Therefore, the reforms proposed by "A Nation at Risk" for education, and reading in particular, can be judged against the criterion of whether they serve to nourish students toward participation in a Learning Society.

A Research Base

The lay public and political leaders often assume that the whims of administrators or mere preferences of practitioners are the only foundations of education. The study of schooling, however, is a serious endeavor. In Nobel Prize-winning research, for example, Theodore W. Schultz showed that investments in education result in economic returns for the nation and individuals. Tough-minded economists, concerned about allocating scarce resources to competing goals, think of education as investment rather than simply consumption or a childhood romance with learning. It seems useful for educators and the public to gain this perspective on their aspirations for schools.

Fundamental research on reading is a substantial enterprise. Because it is an expression of linguistic, cognitive, and affective systems, and since it is essential to education, reading has been studied abundantly. More than 13,500 articles on reading were published between 1972 and 1980. In 1983, about 1,200 studies of reading were published in more than 50 professional outlets. This research is not without cost. Since 1972, $71 million from federal and private sources have been invested in fundamental knowledge about reading and its instruction.

Contributors to this appraisal consisted of 42 experts who relied extensively on this knowledge base. They have grounded their judgments in studies that are frequently more rigorous than those which guide policy formulation in politics, economics, or medicine. Their appraisal is presented in the form of policy guidelines in the areas of: (1) Literacy Processes, (2) Curriculum Content, (3) Teacher Effectiveness, (4) Textbook Quality, and (5) Parent Involvement.

Literacy Processes

Reading

The report from the National Commission on Excellence in Education emphasized that a Risk to the nation results from unsatisfactory student achievement, particularly in the literacy processes of reading and writing. Thirteen indicators of risk were reported. A majority of these consisted of functional literacy, reading comprehension as required by the SAT, drawing inferences from written material, or reading manuals adequately to perform jobs.

Despite this emphasis on literacy as a high priority need, the recommendations tended to neglect the development of language and literacy as educational goals. The sole exception to this pervasive avoidance of literacy was the suggestion that, "The teaching of *English* in high school should equip graduates to:...comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and use what they read."

•• ***In view of the Commission's acknowledgement that literacy is a high priority for this society and recognizing its place as a cornerstone in the foundation for school learning, teachers should emphasize literacy in all levels and subjects.***

Processes of literacy that must be learned by students and emphasized in curriculum in the middle school and high school years include the following:

- Recognizing synonyms for a large number of words
- Understanding words through sentence contexts
- Using syntactic knowledge to predict meanings
- Understanding referents such as pronouns
- Comprehending the main ideas of paragraphs
- Drawing valid inferences from two or three sentences
- Following the plot of a story
- Learning the motives of actors in stories
- Distinguishing fact and opinion
- Locating information in books through indexes and headings
- Outlining expository text
- Summarizing several paragraphs

- Taking notes from books or lectures
- Interpreting graphs, tables, and diagrams
- Integrating texts by constructing causal relationships

These processes are integral to the "higher order" goals of schooling such as learning science and acquiring an appreciation of literature. It cannot be assumed that these processes are learned automatically in elementary school nor are they antecedent to subject matter teaching. Recent studies show comprehension and study skills are best learned in the context of a discipline such as science, English, or electronics technology.

Optimal ways of teaching these processes vary from grade levels one to twelve and are modified in different subject matters. Techniques in learning from written materials have been extensively studied and discussed among reading specialists. A diffusion of this expertise, however, is needed. Interdisciplinary teams should be formed to assist all teachers in bringing specialized kinds of reading to their students.

Writing

The recommendation from "A Nation at Risk" pertaining to writing was that, "The teaching of *English* in high school should equip graduates to...write well-organized, effective papers."

On the face of it, the recommendation is unassailable. Its implementation, however, requires definition of terms and elaboration of implications. Some argue that "papers" should not be the sole objective. The writing of business letters, memoranda, and the filling of forms should also be taught they say. The term "effective" raises the question of whether the standard is audience effect or adherence to a set of norms about language and persuasion. If these issues are favorably resolved, this recommendation is reasonable as a value statement. However, program guidelines are needed.

•• ***Effective writing programs should contain: (1) writing tasks that require a wide variety of communicative and cognitive functions, (2) exposure to models of written language through reading, and (3) direct instruction in the components of writing.***

A general model of written discourse will include the dimension of writer intention or purpose. Traditional purposes consist of: (1) writing to enable oneself to learn, such as taking notes or copying; (2) conveying emotions to others, which might be accomplished in personal stories or essays; (3) supplying others with information, which may occur in narrative reports, academic essays, or filling out a form. (4) convincing or persuading others, which may occur in advertisements or critical essays; and (5) entertaining or delighting through parody, rhyme, story, or poetry. Each of these purposes may be accomplished with increasing degrees of originality by using the cognitive processes of reproduction, organization, or invention.

High correlations between reading and writing proficiency suggest that reading has an effect on writing and vice versa, but the precise nature of that effect has not been fully determined. Several factors have been shown to influence the teaching of student writing. Prewriting activities of a variety of sorts have a positive effect on performance. Sentence-combining, which consists of practice in taking groups of kernel sentences and rewriting them in more complex forms, is beneficial. Peer review or peer editing, as well as feedback from the teacher are marks of successful instruction.

Assessment of writing is a troublesome necessity. Three popular modes of evaluation, include "general impression," the marking of a "primary trait," and "analytic," which rates the composition on content, organization, style, and mechanics. The analytic system is most valuable to students and teachers but it is time-consuming. Multiple examples and types of writing with respect to audience, genre, context, content, and purpose should be included in evaluations. Assessment should proceed on the basis of explicitly stated standards or criteria that are shared with teachers, students, and the public.

Study Skills

The report from the National Commission on Excellence in Education recommended that, "Instruction in effective study and work skills, which are essential if school and independent time is to be used efficiently, should be introduced in the early grades and continued throughout the student's schooling."

•• ***It is crucial for educators to emphasize "learning how to learn" throughout the entire curriculum.***

Classroom time can be used efficiently if students can learn on their own without constant supervision. Likewise, people will continue to acquire new knowledge beyond the confines of school if they can supply internal motivation and self-guided learning. Independent learning is a goal, then, that enhances efficiency of the individual's use of time as well as instructional effectiveness.

Traditional approaches to studying have emphasized sequences such as SQ3R (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review). This sequence can be learned by many students but is too complex for some. When students are taught to generate questions about what they are learning, and to pursue clearly focused purposes, learning efficiency is often increased.

Studying involves knowing when to ask questions, when to seek help from teachers, and how to use resources. We should not be surprised when many high school students admit they cannot use a library, a calculator, a glossary, nor take notes, prepare an outline, or critique an essay. Often they simply have not been instructed on fundamental skills for studying, managing their learning resources, or guiding their own inquiries.

Knowledge about study skills must be transmitted directly to students. The what, how, when, and why of effective learning strategies are used by successful students and they can provide remediation to less successful learners. Even first and second graders can be taught directly how to establish different goals for reading and studying depending upon the task, purpose, and setting. Young students can be taught to take notes, underline, outline, and write summaries of what they read as means of promoting understanding. From first grade through twelfth, students may be instructed in the processes of inference, elaboration, and critical evaluation.

Curriculum Content

The New Basics recommended in "A Nation at Risk" consist of accelerated academic preparation throughout high school. In English, the recommendation included the goal of equipping students to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and use what they read. In mathematics, the objectives included understanding geometric and algebraic concepts. Science education goals included teaching concepts, laws, and processes of the physical and biological sciences. Social studies aims consisted of enabling students to fix their places and possibilities within the larger social and cultural structure. And the computer science section included the objective of teaching students to understand the computer as an information, computation, and communication device.

•• ***The goals of curricula must embrace the processes of learning from written materials as well as substantive knowledge in English, math, science, and social studies.***

Lacking in the recommendations from "A Nation at Risk" is an acknowledgement of the methods used for acquiring knowledge. The report emphasized what should be learned without regard for how the accomplishment should take place. The teacher, the learner, the textbook, and their interactions together form the curriculum. Within this system there is a place for experiment, proof, debate, lecture, and inquiry. The acquisition of large bodies of knowledge, however, occurs most rapidly, efficiently, and coherently through the process of reading well-formed texts.

Instruction in learning from printed materials should be incorporated within each respective discipline. Learning to read narratives in elementary school does not equip the student to acquire knowledge from science texts in the high school years. Only the science teacher can understand the science curriculum sufficiently to help students develop the appropriate studying and reading strategies to assure that they will learn as expected. The math teacher can best direct students in their study of math concepts. Because many texts are inconsiderate of student learning problems, sympathetic teachers armed with expertise are vital.

Teachers have inherent advantages over texts in the conveyance of information. Teachers can:

- tailor the message by adapting their presentations to the needs, abilities, and experiences of students;
- activate prior knowledge by reminding students of what they know and how it relates to what they are to learn;
- focus attention by increasing interest and motivation; and
- monitor comprehension by checking to see if students understand critical concepts.

Materials do not teach. Teachers by definition do the teaching. But this teaching goes beyond dispensing information to helping students acquire the processes necessary for future learning.

English teachers in the past have been custodians of the charge of "equipping graduates to know our literary heritage." Although this objective is seldom questioned, the means for achieving it are a matter of debate. In a pluralistic society, whose literary heritage is represented in a high school curriculum? Teachers must have answers but they cannot be derived from educational research. Knowing that the impact of literature on youth stems from its personal implications more than from its potential for aesthetic satisfaction, most English teachers will be pleased with the Commission's emphasis on relating literature to today's customs, ideas, and values.

Teacher Effectiveness

Time Use

The National Commission on Excellence in Education recommended that, "The time available for learning should be expanded through better classroom management and organization of the school day." A second recommendation is that, "The burden on teachers for maintaining discipline should be reduced through the development of firm and fair codes of student conduct."

•• ***The total amount of time available for teaching should be not only increased, but the use teachers make of the time and opportunities for instruction should be improved to amplify what and how much children learn.***

Instructional time is a vital resource of schools. A substantial volume of research in the past decade reveals consistent and positive correlations between instructional time and student achievement. Further, teachers can create more learning time for students by classroom procedures which minimize student disruptions, insure high amounts of time on task, and monitor student progress.

Effective teachers use time in distinctive ways. The core of effective teaching is the development, or explanation, of the concepts being studied. Investigators have found that effective teachers use time to display definitions, explanations, and a resplendent array of examples.

Successful teachers continuously monitor student understanding. They lead students progressively in a series of guided responses which emphasize not simple accuracy but conceptual awareness. Looking for ways to confirm or disconfirm that students have received the message is a hallmark of exemplary instructors. Students who excel are usually treated to a certain redundancy in the form of reexplanation, refocusing, and clarifying by a teacher whose purpose is to mediate student comprehension.

Classroom management has been understood in terms of either discipline or prevention. The discipline

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perspective emphasizes techniques for coping with disruptions or disorders at the time of their occurrence. This strategy of crisis intervention is not well advised.

Preventive strategies which preclude the occurrence of problems are most effective in creating learning time. Strategies that distinguish more effective teachers from the less effective managers:

- Planning the classroom rules and procedures in detail prior to the beginning of the school and teaching them to students.
- Clearly defining the consequences and rewards for appropriate and inappropriate behavior.
- Monitoring student work and behavior close enough to stop inappropriate behavior quickly.
- Keeping students accountable for their academic work.

Good general classroom management skills open opportunities for students to confront new content in literacy, science, social studies, and mathematics. Management is a necessary superstructure that is invisible when functioning properly. In the absence of management, excellent programs are often never fully implemented. Management is indispensable to student engagement with the content and to the acquisition of learning processes.

Organization

The National Commission on Excellence in Education recommended that, "Placement and grouping of students, as well as promotion and graduation policies, should be guided by the academic progress of students and their instructional needs, rather than by rigid adherence to age."

•• *Grouping according to academic achievement should not be applied universally.*

Grouping of one type or another does not directly influence academic learning. Grouping determines the composition of classes which in turn influences how demanding instruction can be. The challenge and content of the curriculum has direct consequences for learning.

Grouping creates opportunities for instruction which may or may not be pursued. Typically, with heterogeneous classes, high achieving students cover about the same content as low achieving students and accordingly there is little reason to expect significant differences among students in achievement. By contrast, with homogeneous classes, high achieving students may receive more advanced instruction than their lower achieving peers and thus achievement differences will be pronounced.

In secondary schools, curriculum groups are formed according to the future plans of students: whether they plan to attend college, to pursue a vocation, or receive a "general" curriculum. The issue raised by the Commission's recommendation is whether class placement on the basis of academic progress is more advantageous than curriculum tracking. Problems with curriculum tracks have been documented. One is the enormous overlap in achievement for students in different tracks. In vocational and general tracks, there may be as high as 85% overlap in student achievement in mathematics and reading. Course placement on the basis of past achievement would narrow the diversity of achievement within classes and minimize the extent of overlap, which is desirable in some subjects, but not in others. Decisions should be differentiated by content domains.

Teacher Preparation

The report "A Nation at Risk" contained several recommendations pertaining to teacher recruitment, preparation, and incentives. It stated that, "Persons preparing to teach should be required to meet high educational standards, to demonstrate an aptitude for teaching, and to demonstrate competence in an academic discipline." Furthermore, "Incentives, such as grants and loans, should be made available to attract outstanding students to the teaching profession."

•• ***University programs of teacher preparation should judge their graduates in terms of the dual criteria in knowledge of academic disciplines and demonstrated effectiveness in teaching.***

These two facets should not be confused nor should one be taken for the other. Empirical studies show no consistent relationship between classroom performance of teachers and measurements of their knowledge of the

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subject matter of the curriculum. Course grades in subject matter courses do not predict teacher effectiveness. Demonstrated competence can be determined only through direct observation of the teacher performing in the classroom. The caliber of teachers rests upon both what the teacher knows of subject matter and what the teacher does as a manager interacting with a class of students.

Incentives for attracting capable students into the teaching profession should be extended. Financial rewards and prestige of the profession both deserve enhancement. The primary motivation for entrance into teaching now, however, is desire to work with young people. Rewards that accompany relationships with students and the nourishment of learning are fundamental. Improving the accessibility of these rewards and removing the obstacles in the path of teachers who wish to reach them may be valuable contributions to teacher recruitment. Permitting teachers time to prepare for instruction and relieving them from unprofessional tasks such as policing and clerical jobs will expand the pool of those committed to education.

Textbook Quality

Textbook Selection

The National Commission on Excellence in Education recommended that, "Textbooks and other tools of learning and teaching should be upgraded and updated to assure more rigorous content...In considering textbooks for adoption, States and school districts should: evaluate texts and other materials on their ability to present rigorous and challenging material clearly...."

•• ***To facilitate textbook selection, specialists in all areas should be trained to recognize the qualities of written materials that make them effective learning tools.***

The range in textbook quality is enormous. At the same grade level and subject matter, textbooks vary dramatically in terms of their comprehensibility as rated by experts. When students cannot understand their textbooks, teachers may abandon them in favor of other sources of information. The result is that students do not learn to use reading for learning.

Evaluations of textbooks are frequently based on readability formulas. Although formulas, which contain variables of sentence length and word difficulty, manifest a gross correlation with the ease with which students learn from texts, they are insufficient. Important factors that are neglected by these formulas include the number and suitability of concrete examples, clearly stated main ideas, linguistic coherence, a familiar organizational pattern, and a conceptual compatibility with the prior knowledge of students.

One aid to textbook evaluation is a readability checklist formulated by Irwin and Davis and published in the *Journal of Reading*. Some of the questions it contains are:

- Are assumptions about students' vocabulary knowledge appropriate?
- Are assumptions about students' prior knowledge of this content area appropriate?

- Are new concepts explicitly linked to students' prior knowledge or to their experiential backgrounds?
- Is the level of sentence complexity appropriate for the students?
- Are the main ideas of paragraphs, chapters, and subsections clearly stated?
- Does the teacher's manual provide lists of accessible resources containing alternative readings for the very poor or very advanced readers?
- Does the text include resources such as an index, a glossary, and a table of contents?
- Do consumable materials interrelate well with the textbook?
- Are there summaries at appropriate intervals in the text?
- Does the text provide adequate aids such as maps, graphs, illustrations?
- Are there questions provided for the student's self-review?
- Are there discussion questions which encourage creative thinking?
- Is the writing style of the text appealing to the students?
- Does the text provide positive and motivating models for both sexes, as well as other racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups?

This approach to readability does not oversimplify the multidimensional complexity of the structure of written knowledge within a textbook.

Judgments of seasoned educators eclipse the power of a simple formula or a single person in selecting texts. Occasionally, complex text must be learned. Whatever a readability formula may say about the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution of the United States, these documents and the concepts expressed through them must be read by students who are preparing to be voting citizens in America. There is no way to rewrite or simplify since the basic problems are the underlying concepts and profundity of the ideas. Teachers who participate on selection committees need to be carefully trained. Particularly in areas of short teacher supply, inservice training is crucial if intelligent choices are to be made about the primary source of permanent knowledge.

Uses of Texts

The National Commission on Excellence in Education recommended that, "Because no textbook in any subject can be geared to the needs of all students, 'thin

market' texts should be developed for disadvantaged students and other minority groups such as the learning disabled."

•• *The use of multiple textbooks in a single class should be encouraged.*

The proposal to develop texts for "thin markets" requires reexamination. Which subgroups will be addressed in specialized textbook development? There is no evidence that disadvantaged students or ethnic minority groups have qualitatively different learning strategies as a group. There is evidence, however, that good readers process information differently than poor readers or learning disabled students.

Poor readers differ from good readers at the secondary school level, in terms of their attention to surface structure of text rather than to the meaning the author intends to convey. The poor reader may have difficulty making connections among ideas. Spontaneous inferencing is not as frequent among poor readers and subtle relationships are often missed. Poor readers utilize clues to detect the organization of texts only if they are explicitly highlighted. They need assistance in distinguishing main ideas from secondary and third-order concepts.

No single textbook can be geared to the needs of all students. This circumstance does not imply the need for writing new textbooks for poor readers. The existing market contains a plethora of texts which vary in their content, complexity, and cognitive expectations. New uses of available texts are needed. If teachers are expert enough to present model lessons which include phases such as prior knowledge activation, concept vocabulary development, purpose setting, development of conceptual interrelationships, and reinforcement of learning, students will have the foundation for learning from different texts in the same course. Developing the capability for using multiple texts in one class and sustaining students' strategies for learning from these texts is a challenge to the professionalism of teachers and the ingenuity of teacher educators.

Parent Involvement

The National Commission on Excellence in Education closed its report with a word to parents. Without making a formal recommendation, they enjoined parents in the process of education with the following statement:

> You bear a responsibility to participate actively in your child's education. You should encourage more diligent study and discourage satisfaction with mediocrity and the attitude that says "let it slide"; monitor your child's study; encourage good study habits; encourage your child to take more demanding rather than less demanding courses; nurture your child's curiosity, creativity, and confidence; and be an active participant in the work of the schools. (p. 35)

•• ***School-parent programs which improve academic conditions in the home have an outstanding record of success and should be implemented.***

Educational productivity has been studied with respect to parental involvement. Syntheses of 2,575 empirical studies of academic learning show that parents directly or indirectly influence the eight chief determinants of cognitive, affective, and behaviorial learning. Parents shape student ability and motivation. They influence the psychological climate of classrooms, academically stimulating conditions in the home environment, characteristics of the student's peer group outside school, and exposure to mass media, in particular, television.

The "curriculum of the home" is twice as predictive of academic learning as family socioeconomic status. This curriculum refers to informed parent-child conversations about everyday events, encouragement in discussion of leisure reading, joint analysis of television shows and peer activities, deferral of immediate gratifications to accomplish long-term goals, expressions of affection and interest in the child's academic progress. Wise parents also spice these unremitting efforts with occasional doses of caprice and serendipity.

School policies about parent involvement are sometimes based on decisions that force a choice between parent involvement at school and parent involvement at home. Surveys from parents and teachers, however, suggest that both types of involvement are beneficial. Having parents at school helps teachers feel more comfortable about asking parents to help their children with learning activities at home. Involving parents in children's learning at home improves parental attitudes about the merits of teachers. The best programs give parents multiple roles at both school and home to maximize the positive effects on children.

The role of homework in the learning process is jointly determined by educators, parents, and students. Craving facts about how homework affects learning, investigators, who have been quantitatively synthesizing research, conducted computer searches of the vast educational literature of this century. The 15 empirical studies of homework showed that assigning and grading homework produced an average effect on learning that was three times as large as family socioeconomic status based on parental income, education, and occupation. Homework is associated with uniformly positive effects on factual, conceptual, critical, attitudinal, and other aspects of learning.

Parents and educators tell children that time is valuable and must not be wasted. But do we know the actual value of children's time? In a full humanistic sense, the formative force of childhood experience is unknown. Extensive evidence suggests, however, that homes which foster learning can dramatically raise educational productivity. Joined with educators, parents can guide students to spend time more efficiently for the students' and the nation's welfare.

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NOTE: These references were selected from 392 sources that were used by the contributors as a basis for their examination of "A Nation at Risk."

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